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SUBJECT: THIS WEEK IN ALBANIA, MARCH 8-14, 2008

11. (U) The following is a weekly report prepared by Embassy Tirana's local staff to provide political and economic context and insight into developments in Albania.

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

12. (U) CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO WORLDS - MUSLIM GIRLS AND THE SECULAR ALBANIAN MAJORITY: Gentjana Hasani, an eighth grade student, and her sister, Marsela, a sixth grader, were expelled this month from a local school in Tirana over their insistence to wear Muslim head covering in class. "I want both to go to school and be faithful to my faith. I do not understand that in a school where most girls do not wear a uniform, show off their belly and wear tight clothes, my dress would be a problem," Hasani told the media, adding that she wears the school uniform herself. The school director insists that the law does not allow the display of religious symbols in class and that she had done everything possible to convince the girls not to wear the head covering in class, but to no avail. The Ministry of Education supports the director's decision, affirming that the measure is lawful and stressed that Albanian schools are secular. The Albanian Islamic Community (AIC) criticized the school's decision, asserting that such actions were a violation of the freedom of religion in the country. A spokesperson for the group added that the matter would be pursued in the Constitutional Court.

13. (U) This is not the first instance where bearing religious symbols in public schools has caused strife. A year ago, the Durres University Rector expelled two students, a girl wearing Islamic head-covering and a man with a 'Muslim' beard. These incidents, while scarce, have contrasted religion and the avowed secular nature of Albanian institutions. The recent controversy over religious symbols in Turkey and France has assumed a new level of relevance to Albania. In a predominantly secular country, the overwhelming majority of the people look with suspicion over displays of religious zeal in schools. For now, the two girls, while generating sympathy for their sincerity, face the stubborn wall of Albania's secular tradition.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

14. (U) MORE ATTENTION TO AGRICULTURE: The Government of Albania (GOA) recently promoted a new program in state aid which aims to develop the agriculture sector. The project envisages the distribution of direct financial assistance to farmers who are involved in growing fruit, wine production, and animal livestock activities. VAT reimbursement, introduction of mechanization and bio-production are also part of the strategy. This program was introduced last year and, based on its success so far, this year

financial aid will double to nearly USD 10 million. The program's main goal is to boost agricultural prosperity, traditionally the poorest sector of the Albanian economy, and promote a sustainable path of growth. Its successful implementation is crucial due to the large portion of the population (nearly 55 percent) still living in highly impoverished rural areas.

15. (U) In the early 1990s, agriculture was an important sector for the Albanian economy despite continuous attempts during the communist regime to develop and expand the industrial sector. However, over the last few years, agricultural contributions to the country's domestic production have continuously declined, reaching 22 percent last year as other sectors, especially services, rapidly expanded. This has forced Albania to depend on food imports, which represent almost 90 percent of domestic consumption. The small farms which dominate in Albania do not allow the development of large scale agriculture. Consequently, lack of financial support for the agricultural sector has forced farmers to limit production to their family consumption, with only 30 percent of agricultural products sold in local markets. However, there is an increased awareness of the potential benefits agricultural growth can bring to the Albanian economy as farmers' associations and donors work together to develop niche markets for Albanian agriculture such as organic farming.

EDUCATION AND CULTURE

16. (U) THE PAGAN FESTIVAL OF SUMMER DAY: On March 14, 2008, thousands of Albanians from around the country will travel to the city of Elbasan to celebrate "Summer Day." The celebration is a pagan tradition, coinciding with the spring equinox. The traditional celebration moved gradually to Elbasan, where people celebrate the departure of winter and the arrival of spring with

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carnivals, exchanging visits, and picnics in parks. The traditional desert called ballokume, a biscuit made of honey, eggs, corn flour, sugar powder, mixed by hand in a special container, is a specialty of the day.

17. (U) Such was the pervasive enthusiasm of citizens everywhere in Albania on this day that in 2004 former Prime Minister Fatos Nano made "Summer Day" a national holiday. He took the opportunity on the first official celebration in Elbasan to appear with his newly wed second wife. Other politicians followed in his footsteps and now participate in public celebrations in Elbasan and Tirana to mix with the crowds and enhance their reputations as down-to-earth members of society. One estimate says Elbasani bakers prepared 300,000 ballokume for the 2008 celebration. This year festivities include a Colombian band singing on the evening prior to "Summer Day," sponsored by the Mayor of Elbasan.

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

18. (U) "I have followed closely reports of the cowardly assault on journalist Besar Likmeta by Tom Doshi in the presence of Arben Isaraj. These reports are all the more appalling since both are Members of Parliament." U.S. Ambassador John L. Withers II condemning the assault on the member of the press by two Albanian MPs.

19. (U) "So what. Who is the U.S. Ambassador!" Tom Doshi, an Albanian Member of Parliament, responding to the report that Ambassador Withers had condemned his assault on the journalist Likmeta.

WITHERS